



MOVING THE
**AMERICAN
ECONOMY**

***Federal Railroad Administration
Responding to Major Service Disruptions
of Railroad Operations
Fact Sheet***

Rail System Service Disruptions

Railroads operate continuously around the clock, every day of the year. Among the more serious and potentially debilitating causes of major freight and passenger rail service disruptions are emergency events or crises that may be local, regional, national or international in scope. These include severe weather conditions such as hurricanes, snowstorms, and prolonged extreme temperatures, and natural disasters like earthquakes, floods, mudslides, and forest fires.

Manmade interruptions also can have enduring and even catastrophic effects on rail transportation including train accidents, rail infrastructure and equipment problems, utility and power outages, communication system failures, labor strikes and terrorist acts. The most severe conditions might involve the release of dangerous radiological, chemical, or biological materials; or uncontrolled pandemic outbreaks affecting public health. Factors unrelated to rail transportation such as disruptions affecting other commercial or industrial sectors may also interfere with normal freight or passenger railroad operations.

Each individual railroad has primary responsibility for preventing or mitigating damage or harm to its own facilities, equipment, infrastructure, and employees. Provided they are able to operate under emergency conditions, the ability of freight railroads to move very large quantities of cargo and commodities over long distances in an efficient manner can be highly beneficial to successful response and recovery efforts. In addition, passenger trains can potentially be used in some circumstances to evacuate people from, and transport first responders, relief workers and other persons involved with recovery efforts to, an adversely affected area when roadway, airway and or waterway access is impractical, impeded or unavailable.

Role of the FRA

The Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) performs an important role in assisting the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) in fulfilling its responsibilities under the [National Response Framework](#) which governs the conduct of Federal emergency response efforts to natural and manmade disasters. FRA primarily serves as a communications conduit between the rail industry and the DOT before, during and after crisis events, particularly as it pertains to the safety of rail shipments of hazardous materials.

For example, as the likelihood of severe weather increases, existing lines of communication to the affected railroads, and State and local agencies are activated. As circumstances warrant, FRA staff are stationed at the DOT Crisis Management Center to continually monitor weather reports and other information sources to provide direct situation updates and details on the status of rail operations to DOT leadership and other officials.

FRA also provides technical assistance to other federal agencies including the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the Transportation Security Administration (TSA). In addition,

FRA consults and coordinates, as appropriate, directly with the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), the Surface Transportation Board (STB) and other entities responsible for assuring public safety, health, security and general welfare.

FRA Monitoring of Railroad Preparation, Response, and Recovery Actions

FRA actively monitors freight and passenger railroad operations as they prepare for, and implement, response and recovery plans during emergency or crisis situations by remaining in close contact with the railroad's operations centers. This ensures that the DOT is aware of a railroad's ability to resume normal operations following an event or condition and to ascertain the need for and potential ability to assist in any larger recovery effort.

FRA places particular emphasis on tracking railroad plans to:

- move locomotives, hazardous materials tank cars, other equipment and personnel away from an affected area in advance of an anticipated event like a severe storm;
- secure rail cars and other equipment that will not or cannot be moved out of the area;
- pre-position track, signal, and other maintenance equipment and materials to facilitate any repairs that are anticipated to be required following the event or condition;
- limit or suspend rail operations along a specific route, within a rail facility or across a specific geographical area;
- disable or deactivate highway-rail grade crossing flashing lights and gates following the suspension of rail operations to permit a free flow of roadway traffic and expedite advance preparations, evacuations, and post-event recovery;
- perform special inspections following a crisis or emergency situation to ensure that facilities, equipment, tracks and other infrastructure are safe for the resumption of rail operations; and
- interact with local and state officials to coordinate pre- and post-event activities as appropriate and possible.

FRA Emergency Relief Docket

The FRA Administrator has authority to activate the Emergency Relief Docket (ERD) with expedited procedures for railroads to obtain temporary waivers from federal safety regulations. FRA considers local, state and federal declarations of emergency to help determine whether circumstances warrant doing so. The ERD ensures that routine safety compliance requirements do not unnecessarily interfere with legitimate efforts by a railroad to respond to an emergency situation, while providing an opportunity for public input as required by law. It also provides an accelerated process by which FRA can address the immediate or time-sensitive operational needs of the railroad industry while ensuring the safety of the public and railroad employees.

The type of relief granted under these provisions varies greatly depending upon the nature of the event or situation. For example, FRA may grant a carrier permission to temporarily postpone required routine maintenance, repair, or inspection of railroad equipment, track, and signals and certain record keeping or reporting requirements in order to facilitate recovery efforts and service restoration.

Special Inspections before Resumption of Rail Operations

FRA regulations require railroads to perform a special inspection of track in the event of a fire, flood, severe storm or other occurrence which might have damaged a rail line, prior to the operation of any train over it. In addition, FRA's railroad bridge policy recommends that bridges involved in floods and train accidents, or which have experienced unusual impacts, also undergo a special inspection before the resumption of rail operations.

Paying for Rail-Related Repairs Following an Emergency or Crisis Event

While highways, transit systems, and airports are typically eligible to receive federal emergency relief funding to help repair, rebuild and recover from disasters, the privately owned freight railroads primarily use their own funds, or obtain financing from the private sector for those purposes. In addition, commuter rail systems-- typically operated by public authorities-- may use existing funds received from the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) to cover the cost of capital expenses associated with recovery efforts. And, it may be possible for commuter and freight railroads to apply for emergency funds made available by FEMA.

Also, the FRA administers the Railroad Rehabilitation & Improvement Financing (RRIF) loan program. RRIF funds may be used by freight and passenger railroads to acquire or rehabilitate rail equipment and facilities, including track, bridges, rail yards, buildings and shops among other items. This loan program was not established and is not intended to act as source of emergency relief funds. Nonetheless, it is a funding mechanism available to freight and passenger railroads. Direct loans can fund up to 100% of the cost of a railroad project with repayment periods of up to 25 years and interest rates equal to the cost of borrowing to the government.

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